

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

**STATEMENT OF DAN ASHE
CHIEF OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
BEFORE THE
FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE
REGARDING
THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION PLANS
AND THE
OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE NEEDS
OF THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

MARCH 29, 2001

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to address the operations and maintenance needs of America's National Wildlife Refuge System and the comprehensive conservation planning process. We appreciate the chance to join with you and reflect upon the Refuge System's nearly one hundred years of service to the American people, assess our progress in advancing the System's conservation mission, and identify our needs and opportunities as we look toward a new century of conservation.

These are historic times for the National Wildlife Refuge System. As we approach the centennial anniversary, we are proud of the progress we have made together in strengthening the Refuge System. Several important events during the last few years have given us the opportunity to make the Refuge System an even more powerful conservation tool and to provide even greater opportunities for people to enjoy the Refuge System. These events set the stage for us to address our most pressing operational and maintenance needs, and to develop comprehensive conservation plans for each refuge in the System.

The first important milestone occurred in 1997, when a concerted bipartisan effort led to the passage of the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Refuge System Improvement Act spelled out a singular wildlife conservation mission for the Refuge System:

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

In the House Report accompanying the bill, this Committee left no doubt:

. . . the fundamental mission of our Refuge System is wildlife conservation: wildlife and wildlife conservation must come first.

The Refuge System Improvement Act also recognized the outstanding recreational opportunities on refuges.

The Refuge System has long provided some of the nation's best hunting and fishing, and our refuges continue to support these deeply rooted American traditions. The law established compatible wildlife dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation, as priority public uses of the Refuge System.

Among other things, this far-reaching law required comprehensive conservation planning for each refuge, and set standards to assure that all uses of refuges were compatible with their purposes and the System's wildlife conservation mission. It also required that we conserve the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of refuges, and that we consider the conservation of the ecosystems of the United States in planning the growth of the Refuge System.

Building on the Refuge System Improvement Act, Congress, in 1998, passed the Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act. As a result, the Service's relationship with community supporters has flourished. There are now nearly 200 Friends and Audubon Refuge Keeper (ARK) groups across the country working actively with the Service to conserve wildlife and serve refuge visitors. The number of volunteers supporting the National Wildlife Refuge System (about 30,000) is more than ten times the number of its actual workforce. Volunteers perform 25% of all work on refuges nationwide. Given those figures, it is easy to see why these programs are so important to a healthy and vibrant Refuge System. As you know, great active Friends groups like those at Blackwater NWR are a backbone of support. Our volunteers are an intrinsic part of the day-to-day operation of refuges. We cannot do our job without them. We need more of them.

In October 1998, the Service convened all of its refuge managers for the first time in the 95-year history the Refuge System. This historic gathering took place in Keystone, Colorado. The refuge managers were joined by the Service leadership and hundreds of our conservation partners with a goal of crafting consensus around a strategic vision for the Refuge System that would meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, and guide us in implementing the provisions of the Refuge System Improvement Act. The plan that sprang from Keystone – *Fulfilling the Promise* -- was built from the ground up by the field employees who maintain and manage our national wildlife refuges, but also incorporated the insights of the agency's senior managers, its biologists, law enforcement officers and realty professionals, and our partners, friends and volunteers.

Reinforcing the Refuge System Improvement Act's provisions to raise public understanding and appreciation for the Refuge System, Congress recognized the 100th anniversary of the Refuge System as an opportunity for celebration, commemoration, and also as a time to invest in its conservation legacy by passing the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act of 2000 with overwhelming bipartisan support.

This law calls for bold action on several fronts: broadening public understanding and appreciation for these unique national treasures, expanding partnerships for their care, and strengthening the stewardship and infrastructure of the 535 refuges and thousands of small prairie-wetlands making up the Refuge System.

The Centennial Act calls for the establishment of a Centennial Commission, a group of prominent citizens and Members of Congress who will guide the centennial celebrations and help to build support and awareness for the Refuge System. The Centennial Act also calls on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a long-term plan to address the highest priority operations, maintenance, and construction needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System by March 2002. With that, I will turn to a discussion of our operational and maintenance needs.

Refuge Maintenance

Our first priority is taking care of what we have: the maintenance of the facilities and equipment we need to accomplish our mission. The Refuge System has \$7 billion worth of buildings, utilities, dikes and levees, roads, fences, dams, vehicles and tools, that we must maintain to protect their value and keep them safe and in good working order.

Refuge maintenance is addressed in three different but related programs: Refuge Operations supports salaries for maintenance workers, laborers, and equipment operators; Construction supports large and complex maintenance and capital improvement projects that normally cannot be accomplished in one year; and the Refuge Maintenance program which supports annual maintenance, equipment repair and replacement, and deferred maintenance backlogged projects. In addition, since TEA-21, the Federal Lands Highways program funds help address additional maintenance projects.

Thanks to your support, the efforts of the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (CARE), our Five Year Deferred Maintenance and Equipment Replacement list, and our Maintenance Management System database, we have made progress addressing the highest priority needs of our facilities and equipment over the past few years. I'm pleased to say we have slowed the rate of growth in our maintenance backlog from 30% just a few years ago to 7% today. We currently estimate a backlog of deferred maintenance projects, that currently includes 8,092 projects, of roughly \$830 million, including \$172 million for equipment replacement and repair.

In fiscal year 2001, Congress appropriated a total of \$75 million for Refuge System maintenance (\$56 million in Title I and \$19 million in Title VIII) and we are receiving \$20 million annually in TEA-21 funds through the Federal Lands Highways program. Therefore, in total, we have \$95 million available for refuge maintenance during the current fiscal year, and with this level of funding we will make additional progress toward our ultimate goal of reducing the maintenance backlog.

Refuge Operations

Now I want to shift gears from maintenance and talk about refuge operations for a few moments. Refuge staff have identified, categorized and prioritized \$1.1 billion in refuge operational projects. Thinking about refuge operations requires a slightly different perspective than thinking about refuge maintenance. Refuge operations directly support the refuge staff and their activities to fulfill the mission of the refuge while refuge maintenance supports the facilities and equipment to ensure the mission of the refuge can be carried out efficiently and effectively. Refuge operational needs and opportunities, if implemented, will forward our mission in managing refuge lands. These needs and opportunities are entered into our Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS) as they are identified by refuge staff.

To better understand the most pressing operational needs on refuges, Congress directed us -- in the Committee report accompanying the FY2000 Interior Appropriations bill -- to develop a tiered approach to identify priority operating needs; aspects of refuge management -- staff, equipment, and supplies -- that are basic components of carrying out management of the Refuge System. We have responded to that Congressional direction and tiered the RONS database and now have a comprehensive view of the most pressing operational needs of the Refuge System. For instance, many of our refuges do not have a full-time biologist or law enforcement officer or have the resources to support monitoring wildlife populations and habitat conditions. In some cases a full-time biologist or a law enforcement officer may not be necessary to fulfill the mission of a particular refuge; however, in many other cases, they are an essential part of the

successful operation of a refuge. In addition to priority operating needs, there is a wealth of opportunity to do good things for wildlife within the Refuge System. These opportunities are included in the second tier of identified refuge operations projects.

Additionally, we have unmet needs associated with establishment of new refuges that are categorized in the RONS database, in order to respond to GAO's report entitled, Agency Needs to Inform Congress of Future Costs Associated with Land Acquisitions. That report recommended that the Service estimate future operations and maintenance costs for each new refuge.

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your support in helping us meet our operating needs. Since 1997, funding for refuge operations has increased from \$155 million to \$225 million. Our people continue to do great work on the ground and to manage our refuges to provide tremendous benefits to wildlife and spectacular opportunities for Americans to get outdoors and enjoy their wildlife heritage. We are getting increasingly important work from a growing volunteer workforce. We are getting expanding support from our Refuge Friends groups and cooperating associations. We are growing our fee demonstration programs. In short, we are being innovative in meeting our needs, which I believe has always been a hallmark of refuge managers and the Refuge System.

The Refuge system has made substantial progress in identifying and categorizing its priority operation and maintenance needs and opportunities, an important step in developing a long-term plan for meeting those needs. In the coming months, the Service will present its findings to the Department of the Interior and OMB, and work towards developing a long-term plan to address these needs and opportunities.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning

I would like to discuss the status of our comprehensive conservation planning efforts in some detail. The planning process is premised on strong partnerships with State fish and wildlife agencies. It provides us with an opportunity to bring science to bear on managing refuges, assuring an ecological perspective to how refuges fit into the greater surrounding landscapes. The planning process also provides citizens with a meaningful role in helping to shape future management of individual refuges, recognizing the important roles refuges play in the lives of nearby communities.

Refuge comprehensive conservation plans are similar, in concept, to land use or general management plans developed by the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service. These plans provide a long-term vision and serve as a foundation for sound, consistent, participatory refuge management. To date, we have worked with the States and local communities to complete 22 comprehensive conservation plans. Another 72 are underway. This year, we expect to complete 22. A total of 282 comprehensive conservation plans will ultimately need to be completed for the 535 existing units of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

We have made slow but good progress towards completing refuge comprehensive conservation plans by 2012 as required by the Refuge System Improvement Act. The initial plans are always most difficult and we found that on some refuges our planning efforts were complicated by limited staff, training, and shortcomings in good scientific background information. Additionally, we spent considerable time and effort developing our planning policy. We also have made efforts to address these shortcomings by training over 300 refuge staff in comprehensive conservation plan development to date. We believe we have laid a good framework for making better progress.

We have learned a great deal in our efforts to date. For example, in the comprehensive conservation planning for National Wildlife Refuges in western Tennessee, we are working jointly with State officials to plan for refuges and State managed areas concurrently. We are looking at how the refuges work together with areas managed by the State to protect wildlife throughout the region. This broad-based, ecological approach to planning can serve as a model for how we can look at the health and integrity of the landscape at differing scales that meet local needs. By planning in this manner, we involve partners, share resources and expenses, and develop a better product.

Just how large a role the Refuge System has come to play in the lives of Americans nationwide will soon be symbolized by the arrival of the centennial anniversary of Theodore Roosevelt's designation of Pelican Island as the first National Wildlife Refuge. This has prompted reflection and anticipation as well as providing a tremendous opportunity to raise public understanding and appreciation for the Refuge System. Together we can celebrate our first century of wildlife conservation by building a centennial legacy that fulfills the promises we have made for our second century.

Thank you for giving me this time to share my thoughts with you. I will be happy to respond to whatever questions you may have.

#